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RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHJZ/HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHIC/ORG OF ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHKU/AMEMBASSY KUWAIT PRIORITY 2374  
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 4845  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 9975  
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 4347

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000081

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: [IS](#) [KU](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: SAUDI GOVERNMENT STAYS A STEP AHEAD OF PUBLIC  
ANGER OVER GAZA

REF: A. RIYADH 0071  
[1](#)B. JEDDAH 0013  
[1](#)C. RIYADH 0001  
[1](#)D. RIYADH 1871  
[1](#)E. RIYADH 1868

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Classified By: DCM David Rundell for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(C) KEY POINTS

-- The Saudi public peacefully followed the January 9 "Gaza Day of Anger," but some found Friday sermons inadequate in speaking to their concerns.

-- The Saudi government ratcheted up its anti-Israel rhetoric. The Minister of Culture and Information Iyad bin Amin Madani issued a statement following the King's January 12 meeting with the Council of Ministers. The statement "stressed that the Kingdom is standing at all levels with the Palestinian brothers" and criticized Israel's "war of genocide." The statement said the Council also "hoped that the next U.S. administration will be more serious, objective and independent when addressing the Palestinian issue."

-- The government planned to host a meeting of Arab health ministers January 13 to review Gaza's humanitarian situation and assistance alternatives.

-- King Abdullah will reportedly attend a summit of Arab leaders in Kuwait January 19-20 to discuss Gaza alongside an economic summit.

-- Public anger remains rife. Mass text messages are promoting a planned boycott of U.S. products. Eastern Province (EP) authorities have arrested as many as 30 participants in December's demonstrations.

(C) COMMENT

-- The Saudi government (SAG) continues to successfully rein in public anger and direct citizens to more productive means of self-expression: prayers over protests, assistance over anger. The citizenry still seeks ways to make their voice heard, as demonstrated by the multiplying calls for a boycott of U.S. goods. Yesterday's official statement marked a shift

in the SAG's public position, becoming more critical of Israel and the U.S. Past statements criticized Hamas and pointed to the Palestinian rift as part of the problem.

-- The arrest of EP demonstrators appears to be squelching what had become a challenge to government authority. The SAG will likely stay in front of public opinion and effectively dampen any violent or anti-government activity until the crisis ends.

End Key Points and Comment

¶1. (C) SILENT PRAYERS: The League of Muslim Scholars, a respected group of regional religious figures, declared Friday, January 9 the "Gaza Day of Anger." As a result, worshippers attended Friday prayers expecting messages about Gaza. Instead, they heard sermons addressing other themes, with Gaza only mentioned in the supplications. The experience was repeated in multiple mosques, indicating that the government had instructed imams not to make Gaza the main subject of their sermon. According to a witness, some worshippers criticized the lack of support for Gaza after prayers. In one mosque, a man pointedly asked the Imam to make a special prayer for Gaza victims, but was told martyrs need no special prayer. Meanwhile, Saudi religious leaders publicly extolled the virtues of "qunoot" (silent prayers) over less civilized public protests.

¶2. (C) OFFICIAL ACTION: King Abdullah remains publicly visible on Gaza. The King chaired a January 12 Council of Ministers meeting which focused on Gaza. A subsequent statement harshly criticized Israel and did not mention Hamas. The King reportedly will attend a summit of Arab

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heads of state January 19-20 in Kuwait. The January 9 wedding of his son occurred as planned, but the King postponed a customary sword dance out of respect for Gaza Palestinians. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) announced that the airlifting of humanitarian aid will commence January 12, although one flight with medical supplies departed January 8. Saudis have donated 175.4 million riyals (US\$46.7 million) and 144 tons of in-kind relief to the official campaign for humanitarian aid (Reftel D). Saudi Aramco kicked off its own Palestinian Relief Campaign, allowing donations by payroll deduction. The Ministry of Health announced a January 13 Arab Health Ministers Extraordinary Meeting in Riyadh to discuss humanitarian assistance.

¶3. (C) STILL THE TOP ISSUE: Gaza continues to hold the public's attention. A Saudi cleric has called for a boycott of U.S. restaurants and products (Reftel A), a message rapidly disseminated via text messaging and door-to-door flier distribution. A few Mission contacts have shown a cold shoulder to the USG. The president of the National Society of Human Rights flatly declined to engage on a separate issue, noting "now is not a good time to talk to the United States Embassy." Some invitees to an event at the Ambassador's residence took issue with the timing. Organizers of the Jeddah Economic Forum cited Gaza as a reason for its postponement, although this might be only a convenient excuse (Reftel B).

¶4. (C) EASTERN PROVINCE QUIET(ER): EP has witnessed no demonstrations since the beginning of the year. A human rights contact reports that approximately 30 individuals have been arrested following the December 19 and 29 demonstrations in Qatif and Safwa (Reftels C, E). The SAG has not publicly commented on the arrests. The demonstrators have not been charged, but some have been allowed visits by family members. Ashura celebrations reportedly concluded peacefully, though Gaza weighed on worshippers' minds. One report held that unknown parties raised a large Palestinian flag on Tarout castle, a local historical site, which police reportedly rushed to remove.

